

D&D Fiction

Oroon Rising, Part 8

by Ed Greenwood



Chapter 8: A Mockery of Apparitions

Out of silent, sudden nowhere, a handsome, well-dressed man appeared in the chair in front of Lockilgar.

This apparition sat at ease, lounging with glossy-booted feet well out in front of him and a long, slender sword scabbarded at his hip. He wore tight leather breeches, a silken white open-front shirt with wrist-lace and two lapel-bands of ruffles, and a rather sardonic smile.

“My, what have we here? A half-man, seeking something to make him whole? Or a child playing at sneak-thief?”

Lockilgar stepped back hastily, his knife rising, and the handsome apparition chuckled dismissively.

“They’re called halflings, Rael,” a new—and feminine—voice drawled. “Surely you’re not that simple.”

Lockilgar spun around to face the source of the dismissive female tones, and found himself staring at the occupant of another chair: a shapely, long-haired echo of the sardonic Rael. There was a definite family resemblance, and this woman was dressed similarly, in breeches, boots, a cummerbund, and an open-front shirt that left no doubt the wearer was lushly female. Beyond her, Jallana—stuffing a third potion-vial through her belt to join two she’d already snatched from a heap on one of the chairs—looked plain and farm-faced by comparison. And Lockilgar normally judged the warrior-woman a splendidly wild beauty, as humans went.

Then another chair was abruptly occupied, and another. A third, and a fourth. These silently-appearing humans all lounged as if the bone shards, dust, and hard metal treasures were entirely absent from their seats, and they all looked related. They might well be a royal ruling family of somewhere.

Their clothes were expensive, their fingers adorned with rings, and they conducted themselves with a languid superiority that stopped just short of sneering or snapping commands, but at a glance made the three Slayers distinctly aware of their own lowly stations in life.

“I see Rael’s toying with them already,” a woman with a magnificent fall of glossy black hair observed, from well down the table. “Or do they belong to him? Rael, dear, are these your creatures?”

"I? I've never seen such before! A halfling, a dwarf—in a gown, yet; just look at that bosom! And that pipe!—and a wench in man's armor, trying to look fierce! Darrance collects oddities, not me! And these are oddities, let none dispute."

"Though we find a way," the first woman murmured wryly, lifting a dust-filled glass and giving it a look that suggested it had personally offended her with its dry state. "We always find a way."

"Speaking of which," Jallana asked briskly, taking a step towards Rael without lowering either of her swords a finger's width, "do you know where we should go from here, to continue exploring the underways in this direction? Is there a way on, that we cannot yet see?"

Rael looked her up and down with an amused smile that suggested he was picturing her unclad, and finding her just barely acceptable. "It talks," he drawled. "Whatever next?"

Jallana merely met his gaze steadily, and waited.

After a moment his brows lifted, his smile broadened, and he asked, "I believe you're asking me for advice as to how to proceed from our admittedly dreary meal, on through these chambers, without immediately getting killed."

"Yes," Jallana agreed politely. "Precisely."

That earned her another arch of an eyebrow—and a chuckle from farther down the table. She looked for its source, and beheld an older man, gray at his temples and in his small, pointed beard.

"I do believe," the older man told his raised glass, which was also empty of all but dust, "that young Raeladar is going to attempt to say something sardonic, urbane, and witty. This should be tiresome."

Rael gave no sign of having heard those dismissive words, but favored Jallana with a sidelong, come-hither look, and drawled, "And I should aid you why, exactly?"

Jallana kept her eyes steady on his, and her face expressionless. "Because you're the very soul of gallantry and kindness—and I'm both vulnerable and breathtakingly beautiful."

Raeladar almost laughed, his eyes dancing with delight, losing their mockery for the first time. He inclined his head to her in a bow, and said gently, "There are traps, here and beyond. Deadly traps. Your safest way is to avoid all of us here, and this table, and go directly to yon far wall. Walk along it, keeping it always close enough to touch, and when you touch a wall at either end of it, you'll find only illusion, covering an opening through which you can proceed." He seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then added, "Outside this chamber, beware flagstones underfoot that look too clean."

"Ah," the woman who'd appeared right after Raeladar observed almost fondly, "Rael wants her. How touching. Dear, pay no attention at all to my brother's honeyed instructions. He's directing you right into a cage, for his later



amusement. Avoid that wall entirely; 'tis yonder one that's safe, at that end only; entering the corner back that way will bring a stone block as large as a wagon down on your head. And the flagstones to avoid are the one's someone's scorched with flame, to mark danger for later travelers."

"Don't trust either of them!" the older man said sharply. "My family seems to be wallowing in wanton cruelty this day. They're both sending you to your deaths. The only safe way on from this chamber is the trapdoor under this table—right here by my feet, as it happens."

Lockilgar stirred to speak, and Tarlastra clapped a swift hand over his mouth and snapped, "Three helpful guides, three contradictory instructions, death promised by all. Who to believe?"

"Ah," the older man replied, several of his kindred up and down the table starting to speak but falling abruptly silent at the sound of his voice, "the dilemma that confronts us all in life: to stay alive, we must all judge rightly whom to trust—who to believe, as you put it." He spread his hands. "I tell you truth, but the choice must be yours. Who to believe?"

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